

Coroner's Juror on Kathleen Savio's Death

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

This is a rush transcript from "On the Record," November 13, 2007. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

GRETA VAN SUSTEREN, HOST: Joining us from Bolingbrook, Illinois, is one of the six jurors in Kathleen Savio's death inquest, Walter Lee James. Lee, thank you very much for joining us.

WALTER LEE JAMES, JUROR AT SAVIO CORONER'S INQUEST: You're welcome.

VAN SUSTEREN: Lee, tell me — what was — tell me about your experience on this panel, this inquest for Kathleen Savio. What did you see? What instructions did you have?

JAMES: Well, we were given evidence and photographs by the coroner at the time, and we were asked to review them and come to a conclusion as to the cause of death.

VAN SUSTEREN: Now, were you just handed material, or did you actually hear from witnesses?

JAMES: We heard from a couple of the relatives. They came in prior to our reviewing the evidence. But they left the room, and then we were left to review the evidence at hand. But we were not told...

JAMES: Go ahead.

VAN SUSTEREN: Go ahead. I didn't want to interrupt you, sir. I'm sorry.

JAMES: Well, we were not told to — we were only told to review the evidence at hand, and when we were through reviewing the evidence, come to a conclusion and then call the coroner in and tell him that we reached a conclusion.

VAN SUSTEREN: Back at the time that you were on this inquest jury in 2004, did you have any question whether or not this was an accident? Because it was determined to be an accident by your jury.

JAMES: Well, in reviewing the evidence at hand, we did decide that it was an accident due to the fact that we were laypeople and were not medical examiners or anything like that. So with the evidence that we had, we determined it wasn't natural, of course, and we — also being laypeople, we could not decide whether it was a homicide. We just felt that there was not enough evidence there that we understood for it to be a homicide, so naturally, we declared it an accident.

VAN SUSTEREN: Was "indeterminate" an option? Could you have just said, Look, we can't figure it out, we don't know?

JAMES: Well, at the time, we were given three options to either come to a decision as to whether it was natural, homicide or accidental. We did not have at the time the option of determining "undetermined" status. So I think if we did have the option at that time to come to an undetermined decision, I think the majority of us would have chose that option. But we did not have that choice at the time.

VAN SUSTEREN: Now, we have heard, and maybe you could clarify this for me, that there was a police officer on this panel who knew Drew — Sergeant Peterson. Is that true or not?

JAMES: He — there was a police officer on the panel, and he indicated at the time he knew or knew of Peterson. And he indicated to the panel that he thought that Peterson was a good policeman. He was charitable and helped his neighbors, and so on and so forth. So I think that — I think that might have influenced some of the panel members, but I don't know that for sure.

VAN SUSTEREN: Are you troubled today by the decision of your inquest jury?

JAMES: I'm satisfied with our decision, with the evidence that we had at hand. We were not helped by the coroner or anyone from the outside. We alone reviewed the evidence, and that's the conclusion that we came to.

VAN SUSTEREN: How long did it take for your panel to review all the evidence and render a decision?

JAMES: Well, I believe, if I remember correctly, we had seven cases to review that day, and probably, we took maybe 30 minutes to 45 minutes to come to a determination.

VAN SUSTEREN: Are you at this stage critical of anybody, that anybody sort of dropped the ball on this?

JAMES: Well, I hate to make any comments derogatory to anyone, but I do believe that Glasgow came out with a statement with his 29 years of experience, that in reviewing the evidence that we had at the time, he would not come to a conclusion of it being accidental. He would — said that he would probably thought it would be a homicide. But he said that after he reviewed and after he opened the case.

VAN SUSTEREN: Have you recently looked at the autopsy report and what was written there in terms of the injuries to Kathleen Savio?

JAMES: Not recently, no. At the time that we had — when we reviewed the case, we did look at it, yes.

VAN SUSTEREN: Were you at least — did you at least discuss the bruises on her body, the laceration to her head and the blood-soaked hair? Did you talk about that in the inquest?

JAMES: We did, and I was kind of apprehensive with one photograph showing her face down in an empty tub. And there was a lot of blood remaining in the tub, and I just — I didn't — myself did not consider — it was inconsistent with drowning. I feel that the blood that was in the tub should have probably dissipated into the water and drained out with the water. But like I said, I'm not an expert forensic person, so as a layperson, that's just how I felt.

VAN SUSTEREN: Did you — did you look at...

JAMES: I did mention...

VAN SUSTEREN: Go ahead, sir.

JAMES: And I did mention that to the other panel members, if I remember correctly, and they kind of shrugged it off.

VAN SUSTEREN: So was there any part of anybody who thought, Hey, maybe this is a homicide, looking at the autopsy picture — autopsy report, looking at all the blood in the tub?

JAMES: Well, I think as being panel members, and also being laypeople, we just — we didn't have the expertise to determine how the bruises occurred. And I think that was one of the reasons why we just dismissed the bruises. Or we didn't dismiss them, but we just said that we did not know how the bruises occurred.

VAN SUSTEREN: Lee, thank you, sir, for joining us.

JAMES: You're welcome.